

On the Role of the *Festival de Théâtre des Amériques* in Theatre Life in Canada

"Festival" by definition means "an organized set of special events, such as musical performances or plays, usually happening in one place".¹ The history of Western theatre started with series of events that we would call festivals today and during the course of this history there were several periods when a festival-like structure prevailed. Still, interestingly, general surveys of the history of the theatre seem to omit this special aspect of theatre-making. Moving into the twentieth century, we can see a renewed interest toward festivals, and especially theatre festivals on the European continent after the end of WWI. The Salzburg Festival – one of the most prestigious in the genre – opened on 22 August 1920 with Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Jedermann*, directed by Max Reinhardt, and two years later it included operas, as well. It soon developed into an internationally recognized theatrical institution, in our days with around 170 performances for some 220,000 spectators each year. It was Austrian playwright von Hofmannsthal who worked out the basic philosophy for the festival saying that Salzburg would be devoted to the world's classical legacy, would offer operas and plays of the highest quality to provide high-class entertainment. "Peace of mind is what we long to bring."²

If we think of theatre festivals today, Edinburgh and Avignon come to mind, then BITEF (Belgrade); on the internet we can find hundreds of them, including fringe festivals, college festivals, Shakespeare Festivals in the U.S. or the Shanghai Festival. It is not only the criteria of selection that differ but the purpose may vary from an offer of a (usually summer) program – homogenous or more eclectic – to a ranking system, with prizes that would seriously influence the winning company's future possibilities, as theatre semioticians point it out.

One of Canada's best-known cultural products is the Stratford Festival, which has been existing for almost half a century now. Among its forerunners we can mention the *Musical and Dramatic Competition* (1907-11 – Ottawa, Montréal, Toronto, Winnipeg), the *Concours de l'île*, the first French amateur festival (1908), and, naturally, the *Dominion Drama Festival* (1933-1978), which for a time was

Canada's national theatre, a network of community companies that assembled each spring in a different city for a final week-long competition that distributed coveted awards for acting, directing, design and best production [...] adjudicated by bilingual professionals usually imported from Britain or France. Until 1951 it was a one-act play festival.³

Stratford opened in July 1953 with *Richard III*, with Alec Guinness playing the lead, and *All's Well That Ends Well*: the season in the famous tent lasted for six weeks. Four years later, the tent was replaced by the Festival Theatre (designed by Canadian architect Robert Fairfield): in its amphitheatre no spectator is seated more than 20 m from the stage in the auditorium of 2,262. At the moment there are altogether three theatre buildings in Stratford – the Avon Theatre seats 1,102, while the Third Stage offers mainly experimental work or workshops.

The success of Stratford must have played a key role in launching yet another summer festival not far from Toronto: *The Shaw Festival* started in 1962, first concentrating on plays by G. B. Shaw, later broadening the program to include plays, musical events and even mimes from the era Shaw's long life had spanned. The 860-seat theatre building of Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario was completed in 1973 and ten years later the company started to mount productions in Toronto during the winter season.⁴ In the mid-sixties festivals specializing in musical theatre also appeared: *The Charlottetown Festival* was dedicated to Canadian musicals (e.g. *Anne of Green Gables*).

In comparison with the above-mentioned theatre festivals, the *Festival de Théâtre des Amériques* has a short history, still, in my view, it is very well worth turning our attention to it – all the more so, since its systematic history/evaluation has not yet been done. The biennial festival was launched in 1985, and, as the name suggests, the initial idea was to invite companies from all parts of the American continent, "but the FTA soon incorporated interesting theatre from all over the globe".⁵ From the very beginning, the selection committee favoured contemporary creations with a strong innovative-experimental flavour. Since 1985 festival-city Montréal has received 122 performances with almost 2,000 actors from 23 countries and an audience of over 200,000 in late May, and early June every odd year. FTA has rapidly achieved a high reputation among experimenting theatre makers, it has become a popular meeting place for companies not only from the Americas and Europe, but also from Africa, Asia and Australia. As festival directress Marie-Hélène Falcon puts it, "le FTA se nourrit de l'ancien et du nouveau monde; il affiche clairement son américanité – dans son regard, dans ses questions, dans ses choix – tout en revendiquant ses racines culturelles européennes et en affirmant son ouverture à toutes".⁶

The Festival chose the following as its mission:

- to present the most innovative companies of our times
- to support contemporary productions and create new works
- to make Montreal a dynamic cultural capital
- to promote international exchanges and give a chance to theatre artists and companies
- to make the contact between artists and audiences easier
- to widen and enrich the cultural horizon of local students and young people

- to change the world!

In my view, the main advantage of the FTA is that it not only showcases what is happening in Canadian (i.e. English-Canadian and Québec) theatre at a given point in time, but shows these Canadian performances in an international context. This implies that by the mid-1980s theatre-making in Canada had become mature enough to be compared/contrasted with the most exciting shows from elsewhere in the world. The balance of the nine festival seasons shows that Montreal invited many of the most important and influential shows of the given time from all over Canada – and from other parts of the world, as well. Let me just mention Tadeusz Kantor's *The Dead Class*, Robert Wilson's *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, *Popol Vuh* from Chile, *The Three Sisters* from Moscow, *Titus Andronicus* from Craiova and Ariane Mnouchkine's *Le Théâtre du Soleil* with *Tambours sur la digue* as masterpieces of international theatre life played in Montréal. From the Canadian and Québec repertoire our examples are *The Crackwalker*, *Fronteras americanas*, *Hosanna*, *Ne blame jamais les Bédouins*, *Opium*, *Provincetown Playhouse, juillet 1919, j'avais 19 ans*, *The Seven Branches of the River Ota*, *Savage – Love, Joie*, *La trilogie des dragons Iwouskea et Tawiskaron*. Performances resulting from international co-operation are also welcome by the festival: Canadian and Ivory Coast actors showed *Les nuages des terres*, Québec and Italian artists worked together in *Terre Promise/Terra Promessa* while *Six personnages en quête de...* was staged by a company of French and Romanian theatre-makers. Of course, the history of the FTA is not exclusively a list of great successes: Peter Sellar's politically correct staging of *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I saw the Sky* was the biggest flop I ever attended.

Over the years, FTA has developed to attract other events of interest for theatre people: in 1995 the world conference of the International Federation for Theatre Research was held in Montréal (organized by the Theatre Department of UQUAM) at the time of the FTA performances and in 2001 the 20th Congress of the International Association of Theatre Critics was taking place in the city during the FTA. Another series of events were held as part of the 3rd National Gathering of Aboriginal Theatres parallel with the festival in late May, 2001. Within the FTA itself, there are two main units: together with the established companies, there are several shows given by experimenting and new companies from Québec (Nouvelle Scene was started in 1997). Sometimes, the festival highlights certain countries or regions (this year it was Belgium). There are regular meetings with theatre experts and directors – Ariane Mnouchkine and members of her company were available for us in the biggest auditorium of UQUAM for more than three hours! – and there is always a fine selection of films showing theatrical performances or adaptations. All this may convince anyone that Marie-Hélène Falcon is not exaggerating when she says the FTA presents “a vast assortment of artistic voices, approaches and forms in a intercultural, inter-generational, interdisciplinary and [...] interactive dialogue”.⁷ She does have a reason to be proud: this year, 9 of the 17 shows had complete full houses and average attendance was 90% – they even managed to obtain visas for the actor

from Rwanda in the last minute. Before and during the festival over 12.000 people visited their homepage. The round-table talks with participants of Nouvelle Scene, the workshops with young directors and choréographes, play-reading evenings, special programmes for high-school students and for a franco-québécois youth exchange group were all very well received. Apparently, Montréal can gather people for such events – not only from different parts of Canada, but also from the U.S. – therefore next year, for the fourth time, Montréal will invite theatre performances in the scope of “Théâtres du Monde”.

Turning to the performances themselves, let me pick mainly English-Canadian and Québec shows to support my initial arguments stating on the one hand that Canada can pride in her theatre life and many of the shows from that country are ripe for international comparison/competition.

In 1989 Jean-Marc Dalpé was a yet unknown young playwright from rural Northern Ontario. His *Le chien/The Dog*, however, showed dramatic power that could be compared to Sam Shepard's *The Buried Child*. The conflict of generations between earth-bound father and his (prodigal) son back from the U.S. is accompanied by the louder and louder howl of the dog outside the trailer “home”, tied up on a leash – symbolizing the despair and helplessness of both. Childhood memories of this isolated, immobile world – even if the trailer home would suggest moving – are contrasted with the wide roads of the America of American dreams.

Carbone 14 in Usine C showed five men working in a brokerage office: all of them conceive it as a trap, a prison with monotonous daily routines, which they would like to leave behind. But there is no prospect of an escape – maybe *Opium*, as the title suggests. The show was conceived and directed by Lorne Brass who used ankle-high water in the whole stage area, which made walking slower and more difficult, reflected the objects and actors on stage, creating very exciting images and surfaces. Is this the world that Noah would decide not take in his ark?

Terre promise/Terra promessa, a coproduction of La Marmaille and the Teatro Dell' Angelo, using a piece of rock on display in a museum as starting point, showed the history of the earth in two acts, binding geo-history with the story of mankind. Their use of the stage-space was stunningly beautiful: at the beginning there was only a narrow gap through which we could see human feet stamping on small sandhills and plants – later on the whole stage opened to show the actors representing peaceful activities and wars in this worldless play, accompanied by Michel Robidoux's music.

Paula de Vasconcelos and her Pigeons International – a multi-ethnic company from Montreal – chose the text of Sam Shepard and Joseph Chaikin to stage *Savage – Love*. Various phases of love are acted out on the two-level stage: dancing, falling in love, splitting up, coming together again with a very strict rhythm of movements, a very economical use of stage space to suggest the infinite number of possibilities of love. “Meticulously choreographed tableaux keep the image and the heart wavering constantly. The audience reels between humour, melancholy, derision and a desire for

love and to be embraced. We are charmed again and again. And keep asking for more."⁸ The visual context for all this abounds in ironical-nostalgical renderings of North American myths à la Sam Shepard: cowboy with his colt, the lonely drinker-step-dancer limping a bit, still dancing with perfection.

Larry Tremblay's *The Dragonfly of Chicoutimi* strongly relied on Jean-Louis Millet since the play itself is a monologue (in English – though Tremblay's mother tongue is Québec French) of a man in his later forties who had drowned his playmate as a child by accident and then would not utter a word for forty years. All the repressed feelings, his remorse, his childhood memories come back using a "borrowed" language, in English. Like in *Le chien*, we have a play that elevates memories of rural Québec to a mythological level.

Joye by and with. Pol Pelletier offered a mythology of a different kind: the autobiographical play – although she incorporated texts by Nicole Brossard, Jovette Marchessault, Louise Laprade and others, as well – with its punctuated self-reflection made a myth of theatre-making, theatre, and more specifically, of Québec theatre, which Pol Pelletier is an outstanding representative. Her spectacular confession was an entertaining essay about the fascinating transformations good actors/actresses are capable of. "It is a highly verbal theatre, very often reaching poetic heights, consciously following the inheritance of Québec theatre history – and contrasting with the traditional French one, marked by the rigidities of Comédie Française-style acting that she mocks in the course of the show."⁹ Pelletier sang tango-songs in Spanish, jazz in English, was a clown and a highly sensible, intellectual actress at the same time – she seemed to know everything about the theatre, no wonder that it is her "joy" for her!

Guillermo Verdecchia also offered a one-man show in his *Fronteras americanas* which was conceived on the occasion of the 500 year anniversary of the "discovery" of America. Instead of celebrating this event, however, Verdecchia presented a new version of the American image – as an immigrant from Argentina growing up in Toronto: he had to face and fight clichés, stereotypes of Latinos. Verdecchia is typically Canadian: he is hyphenated, but from the other part of the American continent. When he rejects clichés and stereotypes, he also uses them, very often with a strong ironic flavour, both in the "Latino" accent and when using tango-motives or hinting at the "Latin lover". Elements of popular culture are side by side with citations from Octavio Paz or Federico García Lorca, sombreros were as much part of the show as projected pictures, metatheatrical elements, songs and dances. Together with the "ethnic experience" – or as part of it – the play focused on the question of language: although the title is Spanish (the published version has its English translation in brackets), the base language of Verdecchia's play is English – standard English, English with a Latino accent, with several examples of code-switching within the sentence boundaries: some passages are in French, some others in Spanish, including intertextual elements from works of García Lorca or Octavio Paz and cliché Spanish phrases. Using the possibilities of the theatre and drama, he de-constructs both, showing the border in

in various contexts: transgressing language borders, traditional borders of theatrical expression, the borders between the performance's area and that of the audience. He also asks questions crucial to Canadians, like "Did you change your name somewhere along the way? Does a part of you live hundreds or thousands of kilometres away? Do you have two countries, two memories? Do you have a border zone?"¹⁰

FTA, with its wide selection of plays and performances from various parts of Canada and the whole world is making borders transparent without negating their existence. The festival plays an important role not only by making theatre art more popular and accessible for big number of audiences, but also by encouraging playwrights and companies. The festival stage in Montreal was the first step for several young playwrights toward recognition in Canada and beyond the boundaries of the country. Although the Festival de Théâtre des Amériques has a short history, it has accomplished a lot and offered an important contribution to the international recognition of the art of the theatre in Canada.

Notes

1. Cambridge International Dictionary of English. Cambridge University Press, 1995.
2. <http://www.salzb-fest.co.at/salb-fest>
3. The Canadian Encyclopedia, Volumes I-III. Hurtig Publishers, Edmonton, 1985. 1025.
4. For more on the Stratford and Shaw Festivals see:
Brian Brennan, "The Stratford and Shaw Festivals" – in: Anton Wagner (ed.) *Contemporary Canadian Theatre*. New World Visions. Simon and Pierre, 1985. 148-158.
James Forsyth, "Canada, Triumph and a Tent, 1952-1953", Amelia Hall, "Rumours of a Festival", Tyrone Guthrie, "A Long View of the Stratford Festival", Nathan Cohen, "Stratford After Fifteen Years" – in: Don Rubin (ed.) *Canadian Theatre History*. Selected Readings. Copp Clark Ltd. Toronto, 1996.
5. Amy Barratt. "Global Sampling. Puppets, gils!, critics and Lepage at the ninth Festival de Théâtre des Amériques" *Mirror*, May 24-31, 2001. 53.
6. Marie-Hélène Falcon. "Le Festival de théâtre des Amériques: une fenêtre sur le monde". FTA booklet, 2001. 3.
7. Marie-Hélène Falcon "Theatre of the Human Landscape". FTA programme 2001, 3.
8. <http://www.FTA.qc.ca>
9. Katalin Kürtösi. "From Euripides to Carbone 14. Notes on Montreal Theatre, 1993". *Matrix*. Writing Worth Reading. Number 41. Fall 1993. 44.
10. Guillermo Verdecchia. *Fronteras Americanas*. (American Borders). Coach House Press, Toronto, 1993. 77.